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ABSTRACT

Several areas related to minority student college attendance are presented in this research review including the current enrollment situation, financial considerations, prediction of college persistence, college characteristics which affect persistence, and special assistance programs. Current enrollment statistics are cited on the percentage of minority students (especially Blacks and Hispanics) who attend college, the types of colleges and disciplines they chose and some predictions for the future. Financial and socioeconomic influences are discussed in relation to college preparation, choice of college, and persistence to a college degree. Recommendations for increasing minority enrollment in college and improving the completion rates are provided. The relative value of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores versus grade average or class rank for predicting the college persistence of minority students is described, as well as recommendations for increasing the fairness and comprehensiveness of such assessment measures. College characteristics which affect persistence include the quality of the college, whether it is public or private, whether it is predominantly black or white, the amount of financial aid available, and faculty composition and attitudes. The final section outlines the problems of academically unprepared students and cites a variety of programs for combatting those problems. A fourteen-item bibliography is included. (DC)

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Helping Minority Students with Nontraditional Skills Enter and Complete College

The Situation

Since, 1966, there has been a striking increase in the proportion of nonwhite students in higher education. Black undergraduate enrollment, for example, has tripled during the las. fifteen years. Moreover, as part of serious efforts to create equality of educational opportunity during the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of supports were legislated and funded to ensure that minority students not only had the necessary academic preparation for equal *access* to higher education, but also an equal chance at *enrollment* across a variety of disciplines, and an equal opportunity for *completion* of course work *and graduation*. These three aspects of equality—access, choice of discipline and persistence to graduation—became an expanded and comprehensive measure of equality of educational opportunity in higher education.

Yet even the commitments of the 1960s and 1970s did not yield equal opportunity as judged by any of these measures. While blacks now comprise nearly 12 percent of the U.S. population and Hispanics 6.4 percent, their enrollment in higher education is 9.2 percent and 3 percent respectively. Moreover, over twice as many minority students are in public colleges than are in small private schools. In one study of 19 states, 80 percent of all blacks pursuing postsecondary education were in public colleges. Black students are heavily represented in the fields of education and social science, with an increasing representation in business, and underrepresented in allied health, art and humanities, biological science, engineering, prelaw, premedicine, predentistry, and physical science. In 1978, community colleges received 33 percent of all white students, 39 percent of all black students, and 53 percent of all Hispanic and American Indian/Alaskan Native students entering colleges. The tendency for working-class minority students to be concentrated in two-year colleges is particularly problematic since more students drop out of two-year than four-year colleges. Although 3 out of 4 community college freshmen intend to get the baccalaureate, only 1 in 4 actually does so. As London has observed, it may be that the community college, "far from extending equal educational opportunity, serves as a class-bound tracking mechanism to cool out ambitious working-class youth" (London 1981, p. 14).

Over the past five years, a general decrease in both commitment to and financial support for equal educational opportunity in higher education has made the prospect of a good college education even more bleak for minority students. At the same time declining college enrollments have prompted college and university administrators to seek out new applicant pools. Since by the year 2000, minority youth will comprise 20-30 percent of all those of college age, they can constitute an increasing proportion of the students on college campuses if they find it easier to attend college.

The problem for secondary and postsecondary educators will increasingly be how, with limited resources, to increase the number of high school students who attend college, to promote a fair and equitable distribution of these students on various campuses and in different programs, and to ensure the likelihood of their graduation.

Financial Considerations in College Attendance

In a review of minority programs of the College Board, Hanford writes: "Perhaps the greatest barrier for minority youth seeking admission to college is lack of money" (Hanford 1982, p. 8). In 1979, the proportion of seniors planning to attend college was 40.5 percent among blacks, 47.8 percent among Hispanics and 49.4 percent among whites. For those students from families earning more than $25,000 annually (largely white) 81.2 percent planned to attend college, compared to 37 percent for those students from families earning under $5,000 (more predominantly minority).

The negative effects of this entwining of class and race or ethnicity has been exacerbated in the 1980s for two reasons. First, between 1970 and 1980 blacks generally lost

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economic ground compared with whites. Second, while federal aid to education grew enormously between 1966 and 1977, most of this assistance has now been cut. Moreover, after more than a decade of higher education's commitment to facilitating the entry of minority students, most colleges now place their priorities elsewhere. A 1980 survey by the College Board showed that 61 percent of the colleges offered "no-need" scholarships or modified aid packages, 45 percent offered special monies to athletes, and only 26 percent had financial aid especially set aside for minorities.

Socioeconomic background and financial considerations intervene at three stages: as high school students prepare for college (or don't), as they choose their colleges, and as they persist (or don't) toward a baccalaureate degree.

(1) Early in their high school careers, students from higher income families are more likely to enroll in college preparatory programs. At all income levels, students from non-college preparatory programs are more likely to withdraw from high school. However, since low-income minority students are disproportionately found in non-college preparatory programs, they are also the most likely to drop out of high school—and therefore place high barriers between themselves and college.

Socioeconomic status affects the college entry of middle-ability students twice as much as either high- or low-ability students. Middle-ability students who might easily progress toward college if their families could afford it are the most likely to be deterred by economic hardship.

(2) When a student (even one of high-ability) is concerned about the price of college, it is likely that the majority of the college applications he or she submits will not be to private, costly colleges, even though the student desires such a college.

(3) Once in college, minority students who work full-time at an outside job are much less likely to persist to a baccalaureate degree than those who do not hold such jobs. While holding a full-time job during college has unfavorable effects, part-time work can facilitate persistence, especially if the job is located on campus.

The literature on financial considerations and minority college attendance suggests a number of recommendations.

- Special attention must be given to placing minority students in college preparatory courses.
- Care should be taken to ensure that middle-ability, low-income minority students do not fall away from college entry because of economic hardship.
- School counselors should pay particular attention to finding economic strategies that will allow students more freedom in college selection and enable them to survive throughout the college years.
- The several fee-waiver programs, particularly for the Admissions Testing Program, should be continued and expanded.
- The public must understand that more financial aid—at the institutional, local, state, and federal levels—is necessary for true equality in educational opportunity.
- Colleges and universities must be convinced of the need to award aid first to those who need it most.

Predicting Minority College Persistence

The value of Scholastic Aptitude Tests, high school grades, and other assessment procedures is to help colleges predict who will and will not be a good risk as a college student. The problem with such conventional measures when used for minority students, however, is that they may not give an accurate picture of those skills and aptitudes which would enable these students to do college work. As a test, the SAT is reliable as a predictor of the academic performance during the first year of college for minority and nonminority students alike. That is, it "consistently measures for all groups of students what it is designed to measure without inherent disadvantage to any single minority group" (Hanford 1982, p. 3). After a long period of national decline in SAT scores, with black and other minority students lagging as much as 100 points behind whites, these scores have begun to rise again, largely because of improvements in minority group scores (despite the relatively low numbers of minority test-takers). Still, since performance on the SAT is directly related to socioeconomic status and parental educational level, minority students have less of a chance to do well.

For minority students, grade average or class rank has been considered much more important as a predictor of undergraduate grades and persistence than standardized test scores. But again, grades and class rank are associated with family class and educational background.

As the College Board (Hanford 1982, p. 14) recognizes, "the measurement of academic aptitude and achievement represents only one dimension of an individual's capacity for growth and education in the broadest understanding of that term." One question, still largely unanswered, is: How can one discover a test for those qualities, not reflected by conventional academic measures, which may constitute the capacity for intellectual growth in minority students?

The College Board (Hanford 1982) recommends a number of ways to increase the fairness and comprehensiveness of assessment measures, while still maintaining their predictive value.

- Develop better methods for identifying and nurturing minority talent at the junior high school level.
- Ensure that tests are administered in environments not hostile to minority youth.
- Develop new standardized assessment measures, including those which help measure students' growth and change, rather than ranking them against each other.
- Continue to eliminate content or item bias in the College Board's tests.
- Inform minority communities of the limitations and imprecisions of tests.
- Inform test users that over-reliance on them can exclude minority youth.
- Make it clear to all concerned that neither improvements in existing tests, nor the development of new ones, can equalize the lot of minority students if schools do not assume responsibility for improving their elementary and secondary education.

College Characteristics Affecting Minority Student Persistence

Only five out of thirty black students who enter four-year colleges graduate on schedule. College dropout rates decrease and graduation rates increase when student reentry is taken into consideration; nevertheless, the fact that delayers and interrupters have lower educational attainment and less job success makes prompt graduation particularly important for minority students.

Several college characteristics appear to affect the prompt college graduation of minority students. Although deeply intertwined, the following analytical distinctions can be made.

- The quality of an undergraduate college—as measured by the institution's prestige, per-student expenditures, and admissions selectivity—is consistently related not only to baccalaureate completion, but to the attainment of a doctorate or other advanced professional degree (Astin 1982).
- Minority students in private colleges have higher retention rates than those in public colleges. This has been attributed to the smaller size of the private institution, which permits more teacher-student and peer interaction, as well as to better screening processes, which lead to admitting only those students for whom there are appropriate academic and financial resources (Astin 1982).
- Black students in traditionally black colleges are more likely to graduate on schedule than are their counterparts in predominantly white institutions. Since the *Adams* decision of 1971, which mandated desegregation in higher education, approximately 70 percent of the nation's black undergraduates have been enrolled in predominantly white colleges—where they are more likely to drop out than their comparably prepared white classmates (Thomas 1981).
- The amount of loan and grant aid available in a college has a direct effect on prompt graduation for minority men and women, irrespective of whether that college is public or private—and may mitigate against the deleterious effects of attending a public institution. (Thomas 1981; Astin 1982).
- Faculty composition and attitudes play an important role in minority students' college completion on predominantly white campuses. An institutional indifference, reflected in a paucity of minority faculty, few or no ethnic studies courses, little or no support for minority student organizations, and covert racism on the part of white faculty and students, is reported by minority students as a barrier to their continuing through to a degree (Astin 1982).

Special Programs to Assist College Students in Adjustment and Persistence

Between 10 and 15 percent of a college class is academically unprepared. Moreover, student attrition is highest during the first six weeks of any semester—usually occuring most heavily among those students who are poorly prepared. Finally, it is exactly those students experiencing the most academic difficulty who are likely to choose dropping out as their solution, and who are also least likely to ask their college for assistance.

Over the past decade, many colleges have created a cluster of related "special services" to handle what has been variously called "the high risk," "the developmental," "the nontraditional," and the "remedial" student. These labels are commonly applied to students needing skills development, not meeting regular admissions standards, or having placement test scores below cutoffs, or simply to students coming from a minority ethnic group or a background of economic need. Most of the special services draw on federal funding; some are simply supported by the colleges' own funds. According to a recent survey (Noel and Levitz 1982), activities available through these programs include:

- academic and remedial skills
- personal skills (major/career/life planning)
- workshops in anxiety reduction, stress management, and organization/time management
- sessions in values clarification, interpersonal skills, decision-making, concentration/memory building, self-esteem, and motivation enhancement
- tutoring
- individual and group counseling
- accurate placement.

Important to these programs is identifying problem students and finding ways to reach out to them. Most rely heavily on faculty referrals, grade and transcript reviews, and probation lists. About a fifth have specially developed early warning systems; another half rely on end-of-term monitoring. Half of all programs have mandatory participation: when test results are below cutoffs, or as a requirement for readmission.

Programs appear to differ philosophically in their stress on cognitive or motivational change. While some colleges assume that most academic problems are at bottom a matter of low self-esteem and therefore, place the burden of their assistance in the affective or emotional area, others assume that only strict teaching of cognitive skills can bring students into the college mainstream.

Although there is no large-scale study of these programs, each project, whatever its focus, generally finds in its evaluations that the chosen intervention does work to some degree. Students who receive one or more services from these programs have slightly higher grades, somewhat better test scores, and slightly higher retention rates than their matched peers. Perhaps this finding can be partially attributed to the Hawthorne Effect: that is, all specially-treated and studied subjects tend to do better simply because of the increased attention given to them. Clearly, keeping track of students and paying attention to them, especially in large institutions, is helpful.

It is also clear that in evaluating the contributions to a student's success or failure, finances, special programs, the larger college environment, and the student's individual personality and capabilities all work in tandem to some degree. When these various factors are placed in such a way that the student experiences an increased sense of "opportunity," academic achievement is more likely to occur (Flaxman 1979).

—**Carol Ascher, Ph.D.**

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